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ABSTRACT

This digest defines students with severe handicaps, documents the benefits of integrating students with severe disabilities into regular classrooms, and outlines procedures for facilitating integration. It notes some issues associated with access and scheduling, areas in which additional support might be needed, ways to incorporate information about people with disabilities into the curriculum, ways in which nondisabled students can support integration efforts, and how extracurricular activities can strengthen integration. A list of 10 references concludes the digest. (JDD)

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ERIC Digest

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INTEGRATING STUDENTS WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

Who Are These Students?

Students with severe handicaps are those "having physical, mental, or emotional problems to a degree requiring educational, social, psychological, and/or medical services beyond those traditionally offered by regular and special education" (Kelly & Vergason, 1985, p. 156). These students in the past may have been placed in segregated special schools and/or large state institutions. They were excluded from regular neighborhood schools and classrooms because they typically lacked skills such as ambulation; the ability to communicate their needs easily; and/or self-care skills, particularly dressing, toileting, and independent eating. Other reasons for exclusion included the unusual medical problems of some and the deviant behavior exhibited by others. In addition, many professionals and parents felt that the specialized services needed by these students could be delivered most efficiently in settings other than regular neighborhood schools and classrooms.

What Are Some Benefits of Integrating Students with Severe Disabilities Into Regular Classrooms?

Students with severe disabilities can benefit from well-planned and -organized integration experiences. In integrated school environments, regular class students are provided unique opportunities to learn first-hand about human differences and similarities and how to approach and interact with members of society who have severe disabilities. Researchers have found that, generally speaking, nondisabled students who have had opportunities to interact with students with severe disabilities hold more positive and accepting attitudes toward them than do students who have not had such opportunities (e.g., Voeltz, 1982). Such interactions can also reduce nondisabled students' fear of students with severe disabilities and promote understanding (McHale & Simeonsson, 1980).

What Needs to Be Done to Facilitate Integration?

When students with disabilities are placed in regular public schools and classrooms, teachers generally find an abundance of opportunities for positive interactions. Opportunities exist from the beginning of the day, when students are entering the halls, interacting with each other, and using lockers; throughout the day, in regular education classes, at recess, lunch, library, and special activities; to the end of the day, when waiting for buses or participating in extracurricular activities.

Teachers who have been involved in integrating students with severe disabilities have found that careful planning is required to take full advantage of the available interaction opportunities. In other words, positive interactions between students with severe disabilities and others in a regular school environment will rarely happen spontaneously at first; they must be planned for and encouraged in a systematic fashion until the students get to know and feel comfortable with one another.

How Can Problems Associated with Access and Scheduling Be Overcome?

Special and regular education staff should discuss issues such as the role of special educators in regular education classes (Can the special education teacher co-teach with the regular class teacher?); school transportation (Will the students with severe disabilities be able to ride on the same buses as their nondisabled peers?); and position of students with disabilities in the lunchroom (Will they sit with lunchroom partners who have disabilities or at tables with nondisabled students?). Many modifications in typical school routines (e.g., early lunchroom arrival or departure, entering school at a separate door, sitting at a separate lunch table), made initially to minimize difficulties for students with severe disabilities, either are unnecessary or soon become unnecessary. Modifications of building usage, scheduling, or program access should be minimized or avoided if at all possible.

Where Can Extra Help Best Be Used?

Areas in which additional support might be needed could include getting on and off the bus; using correct entrances and exits; locating classrooms, bathrooms, offices, and other school facilities; using lockers and locks; following lunchroom procedures; and using recess time in appropriate ways.

This extra support can be of great assistance to regular education teachers and to students with severe disabilities, as well as other school staff and building principals, all of whom might feel overwhelmed by the typical beginning-of-the-school-year hassles. It is important to plan to gradually fade out the additional support as students begin to acquire necessary skills and learn new school routines.

How Can an "Open Door" Policy Help Break Down Barriers?

Teachers can make other staff members feel welcome in their classrooms by announcing an "open door policy," a willingness to have visitors. Parents might be curious about what happens in the classroom and could spend time there. Whenever appropriate, visitors could observe ongoing instruction, look at the room and its materials, and interact with the students with disabilities. This willingness to be observed and have visitors might serve to remove some of the mystery that often surrounds a classroom that includes students with severe disabilities. Eventually, this could lead to having observers, either nondisabled students or staff members, become more involved with students with disabilities.

How Can Students Learn More About Handicapping Conditions and the Problems Faced by People with Disabilities?

Information about people with disabilities can be incorporated into the regular education curriculum. If students with severe disabilities are to become truly integrated into regular schools and classrooms, sensitization to individual differences among

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peers should become an established part of ongoing curricula for all students. For example, sensitization/information sessions might be presented to social studies classes in a middle school during an ongoing unit on similarities and differences among people.

How Can Nondisabled Students Help Support Integration Efforts?

Initially, interested students could be given a general orientation to individual differences among students, as well as specific information about the new students with severe disabilities attending their school. These students could then assist in both planning and conducting sensitization and information sessions. They could also provide input about activities they believe their peers might find interesting.

The use of nondisabled student tutors or partners to work with students who have disabilities is an effective technique (Almond, Rodgers, & Krug, 1979; Donder & Nietupski, 1981; Kohl, Moses, & Stettner-Eaton, 1984; Poorman, 1980; Stainback, Stainback, & Jaben, 1981). More recently, enlisting the assistance of students with disabilities to tutor or help other students has also been found to be useful (Gartner & Lipsky, 1990). Once students are given accurate information about the individual differences among their peers and taught to interact with them appropriately, they can serve as tutors or partners for a variety of tasks both in the classroom (e.g., teaching individualized programs) and outside the classroom (e.g., using lockers, navigating hallways, eating in the lunchroom, and using recess time appropriately). Tutors might work with students on self-care, communication, or functional academic tasks. They could also assist new students and/or students with severe disabilities by being friends and helping out when they experience difficulties.

However, it should be noted that students with disabilities should not always be targeted as only recipients of assistance from others. All students, including students with severe disabilities, should be given opportunities to be providers as well as recipients of assistance (Stainback & Stainback, 1988).

How Can Extracurricular Activities Strengthen the Integration of Students with Severe Disabilities?

Most schools have co-curricular activities including clubs, sports, newspaper, student council, and social events such as dances. Many students with severe disabilities can acquire the skills necessary to participate, at least partially, in some of these activities. For example, students with severe disabilities could participate in the production of the school newspaper by collating, stapling, and delivering the newspapers to each classroom. They could also participate in student council meetings. Participation in any of these activities can provide both students with severe disabilities and nondisabled students opportunities to work together in a positive manner.

How Might a School Commit Itself to Integration?

School staff could encourage students to make successful integration a school-wide objective. In many groups such as student council or human relations groups, objectives or priorities for the school year are selected by students. Helping to involve students with severe disabilities as important members of the regular school could be established as an objective. Teachers could provide students with information on several ways in which their assistance on integration efforts could be beneficial, and they could then work to accomplish the necessary steps toward the objective.

Students could be encouraged to write articles on integration activities involving students with severe disabilities. For school newspapers, the student writers could report on sensitization/information sessions and other integration activities. Reporters could interview students with disabilities who previously had been in self-contained schools or classrooms and ask them to talk about both the positive and negative aspects of attending a regular school.

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This digest is based on information presented in *Integration of Students with Severe Handicaps into Regular Schools* (1985) by Susan Stainback and William Stainback (ED 255009). The suggested activities were derived from the chapter on "Taking Full Advantage of Interaction Opportunities" by Susan Hamre-Nietupski and John Nietupski.

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For more information about working with students with severe disabilities, see Severely Handicapped Students: Curriculum Guides and Teaching Methods, March, 1990, Computer Search Reprint, 113 abstracts. The Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091.

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